

South Tyneside Homes - Environmental Energy Officer

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	March 2024
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Total cost (£k)	*detailed separately
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	*detailed separately

1. Problem(s)

This should outline the problem(s) which is/are being addressed by the VCMA Project

Evidence suggests that households in South Tyneside (14.7%) that are fuel poor is lower than the figure for the North East (14.8%) but higher than the proportion for England (13.4%), with the current cost of living crisis and hike in energy bills it is anticipated that this is only likely to worsen in South Tyneside.

Sustainability is becoming an increasing key focus. South Tyneside Council are committed to ensuring they reduce carbon emissions throughout the Borough of South Tyneside. Research indicates that housing equates to one of the biggest producers of carbon and it is our aim through South Tyneside Council housing stock to reduce those emissions (net zero target) and in turn creating affordable homes and sustainable communities.

South Tyneside Homes in support of South Tyneside Council is looking to bring down the carbon produced by its social housing.

1.1 The solution

This project will fund an Energy Support Officer role within South Tyneside Homes. The role will work with customers that need it most to help them save money and make smarter energy choices.

Fuel poverty occurs when a household cannot afford to heat their home adequately to maintain a healthy indoor environment. It is very concerning the increase in calls and inspections South Tyneside has had since this winter with customers disconnecting, using portable appliances, or not using any form of heat at all, this in turn has led to an increase in the number of inspections for repairs. This is not only evident in our most vulnerable households but it now apparent with other households you wouldn't necessarily expect, i.e., working class, younger people and new tenancy households too.

Contacting these households and taken a more proactive approach to targeting them in the past has been difficult, mainly due to the lack of resource and opportunity to specifically target these households.

By promoting behavioural change through education and managing tenants' expectations, the energy support officer can support South Tyneside to achieve its objectives.

South Tyneside Homes envisage employing an energy support officer into a full-time position for a 2-year period who will act as the eyes and ears within the community to support our most vulnerable customers. This will be done via several ways for example (but not limited to)

- Community advice sessions (throughout the borough) to all South Tyneside Homes tenants
- Act as an educator following any large, planned elements of works and new technologies, for example replaced windows, solar panels, roofs, insulation schemes
- Direct contact with households at risk could minimise the risk of ill health and avoidable repairs to these households

This would be to ensure that their customers have a full understanding of the changes within their homes and the potential benefits this could bring in terms of savings, thermal comfort, and general energy advice.

- Be able to assist customers who are experiencing difficulties i.e., fuel debt and making referrals to third party organisations for additional help on behalf of the customer
- Speaking with customers and giving advice on how to manage and prioritise bills i.e., if all other options have been exhausted customers could potentially reduce other bills such as sky TV and put the savings towards their energy bills
- Engage with customers where we are struggling to gain access i.e., ‘capped gas’ and work closely with Northern Gas Network (NGN) to support us in ensuring the best possible outcome for the customer
- Engage and educate customers on the potential impacts and dangers around carbon monoxide, working with our inhouse specialist services team the energy support officer can provide advice and literature to those most vulnerable, linking up with third party organisations, i.e., NGN to support customers to remain safe in their home
- Work with local schools to educate the green agenda
- Evidence also suggests that younger people (usually under the age of 25 years) are more vulnerable in new tenancies and now more than ever are struggling to manage to budget for bills – with the assistance of an energy support officer we can look to target this group to ensure they fully understand how to manage their bills and their tenancy, ensuring they are not self-disconnecting etc
- This service will be promoted through healthy working partnerships via networking opportunities, outreach works and events with likeminded agencies
- Work to support South Tyneside Homes campaign to fight fuel poverty through promotion and engagement through all available social media platforms using “#fight fuel poverty”

2. Scope and Objectives

The scope and objectives of the VCMA Project should be clearly defined including the benefits which would directly impact customers on the participating GDNs’ network(s), and where the benefits of the VCMA Projects lie.

South Tyneside Homes overall objective for this project is to rigorously work towards alleviating fuel poverty in the most deprived communities across the Borough. This will be achieved by focussing on fuel poverty, educational initiatives, planned programmes of works to ensure that customers can afford to live comfortably in their homes.

The role will promote collaboration by bringing together partnering organisations, suppliers, installers, and utility providers to support.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

Ensure customers that need it most receiving our attention to:

- Make homes warmer (where possible) through energy efficiency improvement measures and energy modelling.

- Work with Northern Gas Network (NGN) to ensure where practicable – customers are connected to the gas network.
- Take steps to ensure customers are safe and well in their homes and promote sustainability.
- Assist where possible in the generation of financial savings on fuel bills for our customers.
- Raise awareness generally on energy efficiency, fuel poverty, living in a cold, damp home and achieving environmental excellence.
- Signposting customers to other services locally, where needed.
- Provide fuel poverty and awareness training in local communities and staff
- Make 100+ referrals to 'Priority Services Register' (PSR)
- Carry out CO awareness sessions with over 100 households
- Provide CO awareness leaflets to all households
- Warmer Homes applications – we have seen a huge demand for help with this, ensure customers are aware of what they are entitled to and educate them on how to apply for funding or access any benefits they may be entitled to
- Clearing fuel debt by providing advice and referrals
- Satisfaction surveys to measure impact

2.2 Scope

Year 1 - Customers will be targeted by the energy support officer as follows:

- Those living within the highest areas of Fuel Poverty will be targeted first, evidence suggests that this is Cleadon Park and Bede wards.
- Customers who were previously excluded from funded works through the governments Green Homes Grant, although living within the selection area, due to not meeting criteria will be contacted and signposted by the energy support officer within the first 6 months.

Year 2 – Like to have built up relationships so that the energy support officer is able to:

- Engage with local schools, targeting those most affected by fuel poverty first, to provide training to school governors and teachers around the current issues of fuel poverty and CO awareness through the provision of literature and videos.
- Also envisage creating relationships with Hydrogen Homes who already actively engage with school children and provide visits to the Hydrogen Homes site and arrange school visits.
- Year 2 will also see the officer will work with our housing and area management teams, and specialist services team (Gas) to target those customers off gas or who have actively disconnected due to vulnerabilities.

South Tyneside Homes will monitor and measure the success of the above by keeping a thorough and up to date database of customers targeted and signposted with follow up calls/visits made after 6months – 1 year (where possible) to see what impacts have been made on the customers.

3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

This should include an explanation of why the VCMA Project meets the VCMA eligibility criteria. This is a requirement

This project qualifies under the criteria for VCMA funding, as South Tyneside Homes will be directly supporting most vulnerable customers that are in fuel poverty and equally customers that are at risk of fuel poverty or may not be aware that they are at risk. An energy support officer will impart energy advice to vulnerable customers, assist with fuel switching to save money and make referrals where required to other agencies, i.e., health partners, other partners who can assist in fuel debt etc.

There will be no collaboration from other GDN's nor other funded sources.

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial hardship theme.
- Has defined outcomes as required (see outcomes section)
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms
- NGN have calculated that this project will have a positive SROI

4. Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

This should provide information of the customer engagement that has taken place in the development of VCMA Projects where appropriate. If there is no evidence of stakeholder engagement or customer support, this should justify why it was not appropriate to engage with stakeholders and customers.

Within the Northern Gas Networks region, we serve 2.7 million gas-using households. The socio-economic characteristics of our region mean that we operate in many communities that are amongst the most economically deprived in the whole country. This was a key factor in our prioritising engagement with vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups of customers, telling them about our services, about what we do and how we could improve.

Each year, we undertake analysis of all the insight we've heard in the previous year to prioritise those issues our stakeholders most want to engage on. Over the past 12-18 months, we've done this in a number of ways.

4.1 Customers in Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) Workshops

Asking our stakeholders what's important – using our wide range of engagement mechanisms from strategic workshops to customer perceptions, we asked stakeholders to prioritise what is most important to them. Since 2019 we've held regular workshops with our stakeholders, on the subject

of Customers In Vulnerable Situations (CIVS). This ensures that we are well informed to address the needs of customers across our network and through collaborative projects.

Stakeholder engagement throughout 2022, told us that fuel poverty and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. The energy and cost of living crises have further compounded this issue. This project provides a solution to helping those customers who are financially struggling and need extra help to address energy affordability. The project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty.

Recent social indicator mapping research carried out in June 2022, indicated that Bradford, Hull, Scarborough, South Tyneside, and Sunderland were the top five places, to emerge as having the greatest concentration of vulnerabilities within NGN's network. This was based on a combination of the following vulnerability factors:

- Fuel poverty
- Benefit claims
- No qualifications
- Long term health problem / disability

Our most recent stakeholder engagement during 2023 has informed us that financial hardship is still a key area of focus, alongside the health impacts associated with, or exacerbated by, living in cold and damp homes. Stakeholders also told us that increasing capacity for support within services would be key to addressing the immediate and longer term impacts of fuel poverty and energy affordability. This project addresses this need and ensures additional capacity to support households who may be at risk, through a well-established and trusted advice service.

Each year we use our annual Customer Perceptions Research to understand the priorities of our customers. Amongst a set of general tracker questions i.e., same questions that are asked year on year, the evidence in the most recent research (March 2023), indicated that keeping bills as low as possible ranked more highly, than providing a safe and reliable supply of gas. This is a clear indication, as to how concerned customers are about the cost of energy and the subsequent impact this will have on other bills. Customers were also asked to prioritise the list of vulnerabilities listed below:

- Mental wellbeing
- Rurality
- Temporary vulnerability
- Physical challenges
- Financial Hardship

This was the order of priority from the customers surveyed:

- Financial Hardship
- Physical challenges
- Mental wellbeing
- Rurality
- Temporary vulnerability

Financial hardship continued to be the dimension of vulnerability that most customers prioritised, with more customers in the most recent survey selecting this as their top priority. Physical challenges were second, closely followed by Mental well-being third. Rurality and Temporary vulnerability were ranked fourth and fifth.

Very recent (Autumn 2023) Bespoke Vulnerability Stakeholder Mapping research identified categories of stakeholders that are hard to reach, this included:

- People living with a disability
- Senior citizens with long term conditions
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Mental health

Health conditions which are prevalent in the NGN region are:

- Cancer and chronic kidney disease
- Musculoskeletal conditions
- Respiratory
- Mental health

Through the research carried out, the findings show that the 5 original NGN vulnerability categories have now evolved to 10 categories. These are:

1. Physical challenges, inclusive of communication issues, physical space
2. Mental wellbeing
3. **Financial hardship**
4. Temporary vulnerability – including post hospital recovery and pregnancy / maternity
5. Socio Demographic
6. Household composition
7. Rural Vulnerability
8. Accessibility Including language
9. Medical Dependant on Energy
10. Cultural

4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)

This group provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support our customers in vulnerable situations (CIVS). Checking we've got it right – using a range of engagement mechanisms to assess and challenge our response to stakeholder feedback, ensuring we are responding in the right way. This has offered us robust challenges into how we deal with customers in vulnerable situations which meets the needs of our stakeholders.

4.3 Vulnerability Strategy AAA Framework

Within our vulnerability strategy we have developed, with the help of our stakeholders, the 'AAA' framework. This helps us support our customers in vulnerable situations. Awareness, Accessibility and Action. By adapting this principles-based approach into our AAA framework, we will ensure that all customers are treated fairly and consistently. The themes of rural and financial vulnerability within the project, align to NGN's Vulnerability Strategy.

5. Outcomes, associated actions, and success criteria

Details of the VCMA Project outcomes and the associated actions to achieve these, interim milestones and how the Funding Licensee will evaluate whether the project has been successful. Each action should have a proportion of the funding allocated.

5.1 Outcomes

- Increase education across the community on managing energy bills, energy advice and support/services available.
- Develop a 'checklist' for customers and at the end of the intervention – ideally all customers will be able to tick the list to demonstrate how the energy support officers role has assisted them.
- Referrals of vulnerable customers and those in fuel poverty to South Tyneside Homes' welfare support team and 3rd party organisations such as LEAP and the priority services register.
- South Tyneside Homes will have a comprehensive list of its own vulnerable customers (some that they weren't previously aware of) to ensure that those people (if needed) have access to the services they need at the right time.

5.2 Success criteria

- Reduction in referrals and calls to our welfare support team as this should signify that customers have received the help that they need and are now in a better position with their energy bills and knowledge/support to keep their home as warm as possible whilst receiving any financial help that is available to them.
- Customers can check their own energy bills for any discrepancies, be aware that they can change energy provider and how to do so.
- Customers are utilising help and support available to them through 3rd party referrals such as LEAP and our welfare support team.
- Success will also be measured through customer satisfaction surveys.
- Information gathered through monitoring referrals and surveys will contribute to retrofit programmes, it will also show us which areas are most in need of support and advice.

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

The project will be led by the Environmental Manager within South Tyneside Homes, with the support of the Environmental Officer. South Tyneside Councils environmental team also have a strong interest in this in a bid to combat the objectives outlined in its Fuel Poverty and Sustainable South Tyneside Strategy.

Other local third parties where we work in close collaboration is Northern Gas Network (NGN), the LEAP project, a local project in South Tyneside and National Energy Action (NEA), both that can assist us with energy advice and signposting.

7. Potential for new learning

Details of what the GDN(s) expect to learn and how the learning will be disseminated.

Any learning will be shared with stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies

8. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

The Funding Licensee(s) should justify the scale of the VCMA Project – including the scale of the investment relative to its potential benefits. As part of this, it should provide the SROI calculation.

This project has a positive SROI return.

VCMA Project start and end date

Detail start and end date of the VCMA Project and, where relevant, the VCMA Project that preceded this initiative.

August 2023 – August 2025

Geographic area

Details of where the VCMA Project will take place. If the VCMA Project is collaborative, the Funding Licensee area(s) in which the project will take place should be identified.

This project will cover all areas within the borough of South Tyneside beginning with areas that have the highest rate of fuel poverty as reported by the UK fuel poverty index.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director